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ABSTRACT

Little prior research exists on the achievement motivation of Mexican American students. In a rural south Texas junior high school, 120 eighth-grade students completed the 1969 Achieving Tendency Scales and demographic and socioeconomic questionnaires. Subjects were equally divided among four groups: Mexican American males and females and Anglo American males and females. Two months later, 23 subjects were interviewed about their responses. There were no significant ethnic or gender differences in achievement motivation scores, but there was a large range of scores within each of the four groups. Analysis of interview responses revealed differences between students with a strong motivation to achieve and those with a strong motivation to avoid failure. Subjects with a stronger motivation to achieve were generally more interested in learning, more willing to take risks, and higher in self-confidence and self-esteem; subjects with a stronger motivation to avoid failure feared making mistakes, feared parental or other adult disapproval, and doubted their ability to complete difficult tasks successfully. The two groups were not always different in their grades or standardized test scores, but they were consistently different in their attitudes and their approaches to school work. (Contains 19 references.) (SV)

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Achievement Motivation in Eighth Grade Students of Two Ethnic Groups

Much of the research on Mexican American students has addressed their perceived lack of motivation, problems with English language usage, or their underachievement (Heller, 1966; Padilla & Alva, 1989; Zarate, 1983). Minimal attention has been given to the academically successful Mexican American students (Padilla & Alva, 1989). There is very little literature on the overachievers, the gifted and talented, or the successful Mexican American students. It is as if they do not exist, yet there have been many who were highly motivated, who overcame economic and educational disadvantages, succeeded, and excelled.

It is reasonable to assume that most Mexican American students have the same aspirations as students from other ethnic groups to complete school, graduate, and go on to college (Leyva, 1975); however, this may be less often true of Mexican Americans of low socioeconomic status. Also, because most have not had the resources or the proper and adequate support from the educational system in the past (National Council of La Raza, 1988; Quality Education for Minorities Project, 1990; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1971), many have not reached their ultimate goals or exercised their maximum potential.

Before the late 1960s, there were no studies specifically on the achievement motivation of Mexican American students. It was in the early 1970s that reseachers began to use Mexican American students in studies on achievement motivation (Gray, 1975; Ramirez & Price-Williams, 1976).

The amount of literature on the underachievement, lack of motivation, and lack of aspiration of the Mexican American students is phenomenal. Because very little research exists on the achievement motivation of Mexican American students, the research reported below investigated the achievement motivation of eighth grade Mexican American and Anglo American students. Studies had yet to compare the achievement motivation level of Mexican American and Anglo American eighth grade students from the same geographical region.

METHOD

Description of the District and Campus

The subjects for this study were selected from a large rural school district in South Texas with approximately 20,000 students. The ethnic composition of the students enrolled in the school district was 85% Mexican American and 15% Anglo American. The particular junior high selected for the study had a forty percent Anglo American population which provided an adequate population from which to select the subjects for the study. The other four junior high schools in the district had approximately an 18 percent or less Anglo American population.

The eighth grade population at this junior high school consisted of 377 students. The ethnic composition was comprised of 198 Mexican American students, 132 Anglo American students, one Black American student, and six Asian American students. Only Mexican American and Anglo American students were used in this study. The

ethnicity of the students had been previously declared by their parents and was obtained by the researcher from the principal.

Selection of the Sample

The students were divided into four groups: Mexican American males, Mexican American females, Anglo American males, and Anglo American females. Thirty subjects were then randomly selected from each group. Special education students and students absent the day the instrument was administered were automatically deleted from the study.

PROCEDURE

Data Collection

The instruments used for the study were The 1969 Achieving Tendency Scales for Males, The 1969 Achieving Tendency Scales for Females, and a demographic and socioeconomic status questionnaire. The instrument for the male subjects was printed on white paper and the instruments for the female subjects was printed on yellow paper.

The administration of the instruments took place in March, 1990. The teachers read the instructions, explained the different choices the subjects had to select from, and read over the examples. The subjects were encouraged to ask questions at any time especially if they did not comprehend an item. The last page was a demographic and socioeconomic status questionnaire which was optional; however, all of the students did complete the questionnaire.

To determine why the subjects responded as they did to the instruments, twenty-three subjects were interviewed two months after the instruments were administered. As the subjects were interviewed, the experimenter audiotaped them to capture all the descriptive details of the information provided by the subjects which in turn, made the interpretation process easier. Each interview lasted about fifteen minutes. The subjects were asked questions about the choices they had selected and were able to change their answers if they felt they had not comprehended the items during the actual testing. The purpose for the interviews was to gain a better understanding of these subjects' responses, to check if the scales had measured what they intended to, and to observe subjects' actions and reactions as their choices were discussed.

RESULTS

Table 1 provides the achievement motivation scores from the instruments for the four groups in addition to the means and standard deviations of the two ethnic groups. By looking at the distribution of scores for each group, it can be seen that the groups were similar.

Table 1

Achievement Motivation Scores of Mexican American and Anglo American Male and Female Eighth Grade Students.

	Mexican American		Anglo American	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
N=	30	30	30	30
ID				
001	58	51	54	64
002	39	44	39	25
003	31	35	24	22
004	28	35	24	22
005	26	28	20	19
006	22	17	20	14
007	17	12	19	11
008	14	5	15	9
009	11	5	14	9
010	8	4	11	7
011	6	3	11	7
012	5	3	9	6
013	3	2	9	4
014	3	1	8	2
015	1	0	6	2
016	0	- 3	4	1
017	0	- 3	4	0
018	- 1	- 4	3	- 2
019	- 3	- 4	- 3	- 3
020	- 4	- 5	- 4	- 5
021	- 5	- 7	- 4	- 6
022	- 6	- 7	- 4	-13
023	- 8	- 7	- 6	-14
024	-15	- 8	-10	-15
025	-16	- 8	-13	-16
026	-17	-11	-14	-19
027	-20	-16	-20	-22
028	-23	-20	-21	-25
029	-29	-22	-39	-27
030	-42	-46	-58	-38
X	2.47	2.77	.63	3.27
SD	20.20	20.90	19.69	21.72

The mean and standard deviation for the four groups were similar. However, the two mean scores of the Mexican American group were more similar than the two mean scores of the Anglo American group. Considering that the range of possible scores on the instruments used was from a +78 to a -78, the mean differences were minor. The rather large standard deviations in all four groups was not particularly surprising given the composition of the subjects in this study.

The Mexican American group had a mean score of 2.62 and a SD of 20.42 compared to a mean score of 1.95 and a SD of 20.59 for the Anglo American group. The scores were very similar and the data in Table 2 indicates that there were no significant ethnic differences in achievement motivation between the two ethnic groups.

Table 2

ANOVA: Differences in Achievement Motivation by Ethnicity. (N=120)

	Mexican American N= 60		Anglo American N= 60		ANOVA	
Variable	X	SD	X	SD	F Ratio	P
Achievement Motivation	2.62	20.42	1.95	20.59	.03	.86

The mean score in this study for the total male group was 1.55 compared to a 3.02 mean score for the female group. The overall mean was 2.29. In a study conducted with community college students, Kovacs (1981) obtained a mean of 1.49 on his sample of 52 males and 86 females using the same instruments that were used in this study. Dunn (1978) reported a mean score of 2.34 for males and 2.61 for females in a study done using students who were comparable to those in Kovacs' (1981) study. Mehrabian (1969) reported a mean score of 9 on the male scale and a mean score of 5 on the female scale from university students. The higher mean scores obtained by Mehrabian could be attributed to the sample used who were university students at University of Southern California.

Dunn obtained a median Mehrabian score of 3.0 for both males and females which is close to the median score of 2.1 for males and females obtained by Kovacs. This present study obtained a median Mehrabian score of 1.5 for both males and females which is comparable to the findings of Dunn and Kovacs. This suggests that the mean and median scores obtained in this study are similar to mean and median scores obtained by others (Dunn and Kovacs) using the Mehrabian instruments.

Table 3 provides a summary of the total means and standard deviations on achievement motivation for the two gender groups. Table 4 indicates that there were no significant differences in achievement motivation within or between the gender groups. The Anglo American male group had a mean score of .63 in comparison to the Mexican American male group mean of 2.46. The Anglo American female group had a mean score of 3.26 in comparison to the Mexican American group mean of 2.76. The scores were very similar and clearly indicate that there were no significant gender differences.

Table 3

Summary Table of Achievement Motivation Scores for Males and Females. (N=120)

Variable	Males N= 60		Females N= 60	
Achievement Motivation	X	SD	X	SD
	1.55	19.80	3.20	21.17

Table 4

ANOVA: Differences in Achievement Motivation by Gender and Ethnicity. (N= 120)

Source	SS	df	F	P
Ethnicity	13.333	1	.03	.86
Gender	64.533	1	.15	.70
Gender x Ethnicity	40.833	1	.10	.76
Error	49521.666	116		
Total	49640.366	119		

Analysis of the Interviews

Of the twenty-seven subjects interviewed, eight were Mexican American males, seven were Mexican American females, six were Anglo American males, and six were Anglo American females. By inspecting the subjects' responses to the Mehrabian scale, the researcher noted specific patterns in the choices the students had made. These patterns determined the initial questions the researcher was going to ask in the interviews.

The experimenter was looking for explanations that would answer why some students were more motivated than others, why there was a large range in the achievement motivation scores, and what differences existed between those that were highly motivated and those that were not.

After analyzing the subjects answers, the experimenter found that the subjects' answers did not differ across ethnic or gender groups. What was found were differences in the answers between the subjects who had a stronger motive to achieve success and those who had a stronger motive to avoid failure. The answers were consistent between the subjects high in achievement motivation and the subjects low in achievement motivation in the four groups.

DISCUSSION

There are two features of the findings that merit discussion: 1. The findings do not support any ethnic or gender differences in achievement motivation. 2. Although there were no significant ethnic or gender differences in achievement motivation scores or school achievement, there were differences in motivation and in achievement within both ethnic and gender groups. Interviews with subjects who had stronger motives to achieve success than to avoid failure revealed some contrasts in their attitudes.

The demographic and socioeconomic status questionnaire revealed no clear differences between the educational or occupational status of the parents in the two ethnic groups. Subjects who had one or both parents born in Mexico were found not only among subjects who had stronger motives to avoid failure, but also among subjects who had stronger motives to achieve success. In fact, in the Mexican American female group, three of the five students who had the strongest motive to achieve success scores were born in Mexico in addition to both of their parents.

On the other hand, it was found that the achievement motivation scores of subjects on the free lunch program ranged from +3 to a -48, with the majority having a stronger motive to avoid failure. Socioeconomic status, thus, does seem to be related to achievement motivation as measured by the Mehrabian scales.

Differences in Students' Attitudes

Although at first some of the subjects had difficulty expressing their thoughts in the interviews, as they became more comfortable, they were very open about their true feelings. They were not the least reluctant to answer the questions asked. The interviews clarified differences between those subjects having a stronger motive to achieve success and those subjects having a stronger motive to avoid failure.

Subjects who had a stronger motive to succeed than to avoid failure were generally more interested in learning, more willing to take risks, and higher in self-confidence and self-esteem than those who had a stronger motive to avoid failure. The latter group admitted fear of making mistakes, fear of parental or other adult disapproval if they failed at a particular task, and doubt about their ability to complete difficult tasks successfully. They were unwilling to take risks, always preferring to attack an easy task rather than a challenging one. The two groups were not always different in their grades or in their test scores, but they were consistently different in their attitudes and in their approaches to school work. These differences appear to be similar to those identified by Dweck

between students who are performance-oriented and those who are learning-oriented (Copley, 1991; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

According to Dweck's model, students who are performance-oriented and perceive their ability as being low exhibit a behavior of learned helplessness. They want to appear competent to others so they do not take risks. These students feel very helpless after they have experienced failure. They tend to become unmotivated and eventually give up. Students who are performance-oriented and perceive their ability as being high exhibit a mastery-oriented behavior and are willing to take risks or seek challenges. In the present study, the subjects who had a stronger motive to avoid failure had similar characteristics to those identified as exhibiting a learned helplessness behavior. The subjects who had a stronger motive to achieve success in the present study had characteristics similar to those identified as exhibiting a mastery-oriented behavior (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Elliott & Dweck, 1988).

In a recent research study using third graders, Copley (1991) found that after failure, performance-oriented students as a group, tried to avoid any further failure, became discouraged, less motivated, and more negative, which, according to Dweck's model, characterized the learned helplessness behavior. They viewed performance as being more important than learning a task. It was more important for those students to perform and appear competent by not failing than to learn. These students chose not to take risks and eventually gave up. However, after the learning-oriented students experienced failure, they continued to be on task, were still motivated and positive. They were also better able to handle failure

than the performance-oriented students. Copley's research supports Dweck's model.

Copley's findings strengthen the speculations of this experimenter. Subjects who had a stronger motive to avoid failure in the present study were in a state of learned helplessness because they tended to avoid failure. Instead of learning the task (learning-oriented) and achieving, they preferred to perform (performance-oriented) well enough to avoid negative comments about how competent they were. Putting themselves in a state of failure made them feel helpless, so to avoid those feelings, they avoided failure entirely by selecting easy tasks, taking no risks, or refusing to try at all.

A number of the performance-oriented students had very good grades and high test scores on the California Achievement Test, but even some of them did not perceive themselves as succeeding and doing well in school. A portion of that group shared the characteristics of a mastery-oriented behavior with the learning-oriented group, but others, despite their grades and test scores, did not perceive themselves as attaining success.

The subjects who had a stronger motive to achieve success in the present study were in a state of mastery-orientation because they were willing to endeavor challenges and had a high level of persistence whether they succeeded or failed. It can be concluded that the subjects who had a strong motive to achieve success or to avoid failure in this study resembled the learned helplessness students and the learning-oriented students in Copley's research and those described in Dweck's model. There is reason to speculate that

these two behaviors (the motive to avoid failure/learned helplessness and the motive to achieve success/learning-orientation) are unrelated to ethnicity and gender but possibly related to socioeconomic status.

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